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# Innovate Is Enough (Or Is It?)

Mark Rosewater  
Making Magic  
Monday, February 18, 2008



Today's column has all kinds of goodies. First, I've been inspired by an issue that came up as an offshoot of my column two weeks ago ([The Space Between The Notes](#)). Then it's time to talk *Shadowmoor* block as I make my first few comments about what you all can expect for the upcoming two sets. And if that isn't enough, I even have another Talkback where I ask a question to my readers so that I can hear what you have to say. This might not seem like a lot, but trust me, there are thousands of words about to come your way.

## I Can't Believe I Innovate the Whole Thing

So two weeks ago I wrote a column based on some feedback I had gotten. I printed the following letter as a sample of the issues at hand:

Mark,

I read your column every week and I do feel that you've had a positive impact on the game. With that out of the way, will you stop touting the "amazing design space" of the race/class model. Changing "All goblins get +1/+1" to "All soldiers get +1/+1" is not innovation! Innovation is defined as "the act of introducing something new". What's new about treating classes like races? Onslaught already did it. I know it's your job to make everything seem like the latest, greatest thing, but you really lose credibility when you try to sell half-baked leftovers as something new and delicious. Just own up to the fact that race/class doesn't open any new design space that wasn't already explored five years ago.

Yours truly,  
E.E. Wood

I spent most of my column addressing this letter. This led to me getting a number more letters. The following is the one that I felt best summed up what was being said (my readers, I should note, seem neither timid about writing me nor worried about speaking honestly):

Dear Mark Rosewater,  
Regarding your article "The Space Between The Notes":

Mark—were you joking with today's column? It was an interesting read, it was a good look at your design philosophy. However, you presented a valid reader criticism, and then not only didn't answer it—you strongly supported it!

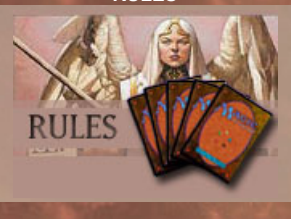
Everything you said, about Guy 1-4 and the four booster spells? Yeah, we GET it. The guy who wrote to you—he GOT it. There's nothing you said (at least nothing non-philosophical) that shed any new light onto the topic—because no new light NEEDED to be shed.

People don't think race-class is exciting because it's not; people think it doesn't open up new design space because it doesn't. What is special about a Merfolk Wizard versus a Merfolk Elf or a **Zombie Assassin** or a Warrior Cleric? Putting multiple things on the type line—WOW! That IS huge, and that was a GREAT development in **Magic's** history. Calling on a race, and one a class? That's limiting (in a boring way), it's generic fantasy, and since there is no functional difference between races and classes... why should we care?

Do I like cards with multiple creature types? Yes! Do I care if you call one a class and one a race, when those designations have no effect on the game? No!

I respect you for presenting harsh criticism and attempting to answer it. But please—go back and read that email again. It's not that you failed to explain things properly to us. It's that he's right; you're claiming something is new when it's not.

--Aaron

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I did exactly as Aaron asked and reread my column. Then I reread the letter. I then took several days to really think about what was being said. I came back after the few days' break and reread both again. After giving this topic a lot of thought, I have some things I want to say.

First, I believe what E.E. and Aaron are saying about race/class is not the same thing that I'm saying about race/class. Part of the confusion comes from the fact that I didn't correct a mistaken assumption that E.E. had in his letter. He connects "design space" and "innovation" as terms that are synonymous. They are not. Yes, they are connected, but they are far from the same thing.

Let me explain. Design space has to do with the ability to create new cards. When I talk about creating new design space, I am simply talking about the ability to generate new cards. And when I say new cards, what I really mean is new cards, new mechanics, new themes, new block designs, new inter-block designs, new tools, new flavors, new tones, new moods, etc. I am talking about, quite simply, making more **Magic**. As Head Designer this is an ever-present issue for me to deal with and is, in my opinion (in the long-term at least), my most important one.

Innovation has to do with the ability to make and do things that haven't been done before. Note that innovation comes in two forms, content and execution. I can create things I have never created before and I can create things in a way that I've never created them before. Both are innovation but one is in front of the scenes while the other is behind the scenes. Assuming you are familiar with the nine thousand-plus **Magic** cards in existence, you can tell when a card (or mechanic, or theme, etc.) is doing something new. If it's new on our end, it's not quite as easy to discern.

Now that I've defined them I'll get to my next point—design space and innovation are not the same thing. Let me give you a few examples.

The keywording of evergreen mechanics (the latest batch being deathotuch, lifelink, reach and shroud) opens design space. There were numerous cards that had been killed over the years because the text didn't fit. Shortening one or two lines down to one word would have in most of the cases made the card printable. In addition, it is much easier to make cards that reference keywords. ([My column on keywording](#), for example, gives examples of cards from the *Onslaught* block that couldn't have been designed without keywords—feel free to check out that column for more on this issue.) In short, keywords open design space. On the flip side, keywording existing abilities isn't innovative. The cards do the same things they did before. Nothing new has been created.

In *Time Spiral*, we brought back a host of old keywords. To keep a flavor of the past, we instituted a design rule that said we couldn't innovate with the mechanics. All we did was put basic effects on the cards that hadn't been used with that mechanic before—we put a tutor effect on a buyback card, we put "draw a card" on a flashback card, we put "deals 1 damage to target creature or player" on a storm card, etc. This increased design space for *Time Spiral*, but it didn't innovate anything. (I will point out that the idea of bringing back all the old mechanics at once was innovative, but once again, that is execution not content.)

During *Tempest* design, we came up with a series of cards that you could choose, if they were in your library, to draw one less card and put them into your opening hand (don't ask how this would work in the rules—we never got that far). We even had a cycle of five color-producing lands with this ability that came into play tapped. It took us just one playtest to realize that the mechanic would drastically alter **Magic**. It would greatly lesson what could be played because these games would take out much of the randomness forcing every deck to follow a small handful of strategies. This idea was very innovative but we killed it in part because we knew it would cut deeply into design space (okay, and make the game a lot less fun).



## Innovate Crazy Nights

Now that I've explained how they're not the same, let me walk you through why design space is more important for me as Head Designer. My job, when you boil everything down, is to sell packs of **Magic**. The way I've chosen to do this (and this is a philosophy of all of R&D) is to make the game as fun as it can be. The theory is that if **Magic** is enjoyable enough it will drive players to want to purchase it.

As an aside, I want to point out that **Magic** also means a lot to me on a personal level. The game has given me so much in so many ways that I feel a personal investment in it. My desire to keep **Magic** great goes far beyond my paycheck.

So my job is to make **Magic** as enjoyable as possible. How do I do this? What is the number one thing I have to do to accomplish it? Surprise the audience? While that's up there, it's not number one. Excite the audience? Higher, but still not number one. My number one task is pleasing the audience. I have to make the game what they want it to be.

As I often say, **Magic** is at its heart a game of discovery. So yes, I need to keep reinventing the environment. But more important, I have to keep **Magic** the game that people fell in love with. It would be very innovative to create a set with no red direct damage and no black discard and no green **Giant Growth**-like effects. It would be very innovative to make a set of all sorceries. It would be very innovative to make some booster packs show up without any rares.

Innovation in itself is not what pleases people.

Innovation is a tool that design can carefully use to please players. It's not the only tool though. It's one of many tools. And yes, innovation is not the key tool to creating a set that revisits an old theme. Sure, we can create twists. We can innovate in how we make the set. And yes, we can throw a few new things in the mix (like say planeswalkers) to toss the innovation junkies a bone. But the key to race/class isn't its innovation. If you go back and

re-read what I've said, I've never claimed race/class was innovative (although I do believe we were innovative in the method by which we used it—once again, execution rather than content). I've said that it created design space. And it does.

Here's how. There is a finite amount of tribal cards that can be designed. There's just so many ways to enhance a creature. The key to taking the next step in tribal was to find ways to make interesting interactions between tribal cards. Most of the early multiple creature typing I did (see my column [The Amazing Race/Class](#) for more on this) in *Odyssey* and *Onslaught* was exploring this space. The problem was this: in order for the system to really work, the majority of the creatures needed multiple types, but my early attempts relied on tricks like making races (aven and nantuko) that naturally had two types or making use of types like Zombie that could be tacked onto another type. Relying on gimmicks like this was very limiting. (I should note my even earlier experiment in *Invasion* of just putting two random creature types on the line—say hello, Gaea's Skyfolk—makes the modern creative team actually cringe, as it makes a total mockery of flavor.)

At the same time I was trying to crack this puzzle, along came a very influential piece of data. Do you know one of the best-selling small expansions of all time? *Legions*. This might come as a shock for some of you because the set is known for being kind of low on Constructed tournament-worthy cards, but players ate it up. There are many theories in R&D about why this particular set sold so well but one that can't be ignored is that a lot of players just love tribal (and creatures, of course). Note that our market research also backed this contention up. What this meant was that my puzzle now became mandatory to solve. We were going to revisit the tribal theme again (and again and again) because players really liked it.



Then along comes the creative team with a proposal that they felt helped bring more flavor to the game—a proposal that coincidentally did exactly what I was wracking my brain figuring out how to do. And it wasn't being suggested for design concerns but as a means to help creative. That's the reason I fought so hard for race/class. Because the solution (an organic one no less) to my problem was delivered on a silver platter.

When I trumpet race/class it's not because I believe we are doing something innovative. It's because it allows us to build a foundation that creates awesome gameplay. *Lorwyn* and *Morningtide* haven't reinvented the wheel, they've just made it a lot steadier of a ride. *Onslaught* was the innovative tribal set. It was the one that proved that an entire block could be built around a theme that was at the time just something Timmy (and a few Johnnies) did. *Lorwyn* block was a chance for design to prove that we could turn the theme into something deeper and more meaningful.

Race/class isn't the sexy, splashy part of tribal design, it's the underlying structure that design needs to get the job done. *Lorwyn* block, while borrowing a lot of elements from *Onslaught* block, has its own identity. It has its own feel and gameplay. Since Making Magic is the design column, I've been pointing out that we were able to do that because of the tools given to us by race/class. A lot of my column is explaining the nuts and bolts of design. For tribal, that's race/class.

## Innovate Men Out

My days of introspection made me realize that there was another deeper point to both letters, and I believe it is this: E.E. and Aaron don't like the tribal theme. It doesn't play into why they like **Magic**. And they're not alone. I read my email and the Internet. I know that there is a minority that just doesn't like tribal. In fact, there is a minority that doesn't like every theme we do. Whenever I spend time and energy talking about why that theme is great and what we did to design it, that group feels I'm wasting their time. Here's the problem: there's a majority of players who like that theme (and be aware that tribal is currently our second most popular theme of all time, behind multicolor, according to our sales and market research data). To those people, the ins and outs of that theme's design is very interesting.

Layered on top of that is another issue. Some players dislike the idea that we revisit old themes. They want us to constantly venture out into virgin design territory. But as I said above, my job is to please players. And the majority of players (in fact, I'll go so far as to say the majority of people) enjoy revisiting things they've liked in the past. We don't revisit themes because we're lazy. We do it because it's what players enjoy. This isn't to say we don't mine new design veins (more on that in a moment); we just don't have to do it for every theme of every block.

I think the letter writers feel as if I'm trying to sell them something they don't want. That honestly isn't my goal. If we're going to commit to a theme, then I, as Head Designer and as a columnist, have to commit to it. I am going to figure out how we can make the theme the best it can be and then I am going to explain that to my readers. I am invested in tribal. I've spent a year of my life focusing on the topic. I have committed more time to thinking about it than anyone probably cares to know. So when I get excited about it it's because I am excited about it. (And to be fair, I do excite more easily than the average person—really, this isn't some writer persona; who you see in my writing is who I am.) Trust me, while I'm good at many things, not saying what I think isn't one of them.



That said, we do try each block to make cards that go beyond narrowly fitting into the theme (planeswalkers, evoke, and clash have next to nothing to do with tribal) and every set has some innovation in it (*Lorwyn* block has two new card types). I purposely go out of my way in some columns to tackle topics that venture away from the current

block's themes. I do what I'm able to please as many people as I can. But I cannot please all the people all of the time (Lincoln had this one right), so most of the time I choose to focus on pleasing the people who are inclined to like what we're currently doing. Satisfying those that don't is a hopeless task. (For more on this philosophy, check out Life Lesson #1 [here](#).)

The good news is that **Magic** is all about change. What this means is that we are constantly pushing the pendulum in new directions. If you don't like what this block is about, we have a fresh new block right around the corner. So E.E. and Aaron, I get that tribal isn't your cup of tea. Please respect though the fact that for a lot of others players it is. They're excited by it and they like seeing me excited by it. What isn't "new" to you is very much new to them (mostly because they're interested in the nitty gritty that you could care less about). There is some good news for you though. The tribal block is winding up and pretty soon (okay, next paragraph) I'm going to be focusing on something perhaps you'll like a whole lot more. E.E. and Aaron, *Shadowmoor* is coming.

## ***Shadowmoor* Than Meets The Eye**

And with that segue, why don't we spend the rest of the column talking about what the next block has to offer?

For starters, here are the two Magic Arcanas that announced *Shadowmoor* and *Eventide*, respectively.

### **Shadowmoor Announcement**

**M**agic's May 2008 large set, code-named "Jelly" and the first set of the "Jelly / Doughnut" block, is called *Shadowmoor*.



<b>Set Name</b>	<i>Shadowmoor</i>
<b>Release Date</b>	May 2, 2008
<b>Prerelease Events</b>	April 19-20, 2008
<b>Design Team</b>	Mark Rosewater (lead) Sean Fletcher Mark Gottlieb Devin Low Ken Troop
<b>Development Team</b>	Aaron Forsythe (lead) Devin Low Alexis Janson Matt Place Jake Theis Steve Warner Doug Beyer



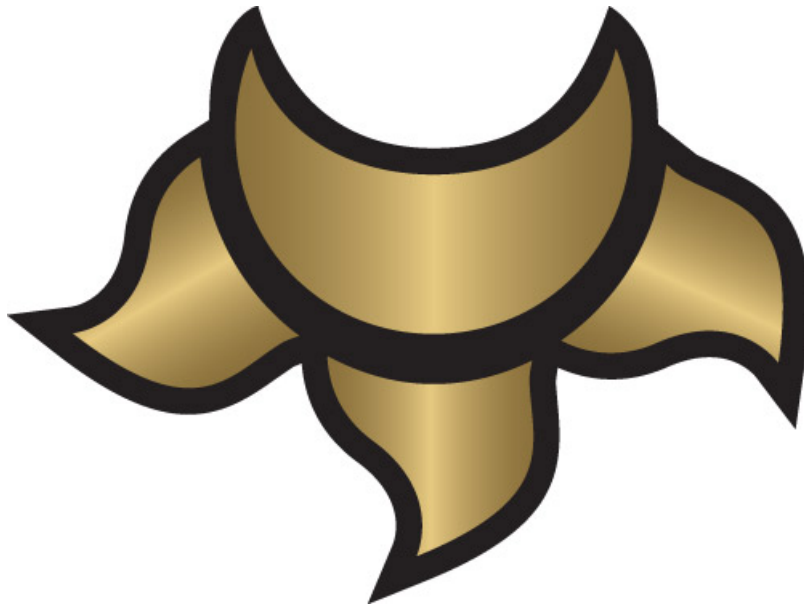
For more on the structure of the 2007-2008 *Lorwyn* and *Shadowmoor* Blocks, see Mark Rosewater's article [Two Plus Two](#). Watch [magicthegathering.com](http://magicthegathering.com) for more details on *Shadowmoor*.

### Eventide Announcement

**M**agic's July 2008 small set, code-named "Doughnut" and the second set of the "Jelly / Doughnut" block, is called *Eventide*.



<b>Set Name</b>	<i>Eventide</i>
<b>Block</b>	Set 2 of 2 in the <i>Shadowmoor</i> Block
<b>Number of Cards</b>	180
<b>Release Date</b>	July 25, 2008
<b>Prerelease Events</b>	July 12-13, 2008
<b>Previews start on <a href="http://magicthegathering.com">magicthegathering.com</a></b>	July 1, 2008
<b>Design Team</b>	Mark Rosewater (lead) Alexis Janson Ken Nagle Jake Theis Brian Tinsman
<b>Development Team</b>	Matt Place (lead) Nate Heiss Erik Lauer Ken Nagle Mike Turian

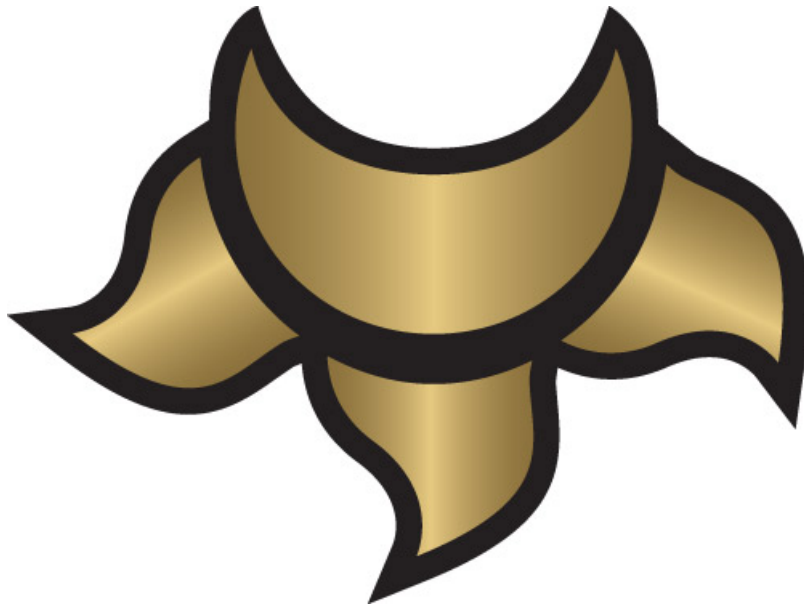


For more on the structure of the 2007-2008 *Lorwyn* and *Shadowmoor* blocks, see Mark Rosewater's article [Two Plus Two](#). Watch [magicthegathering.com](#) for further details on *Eventide*.

Let me start by stating how pumped I am about the *Shadowmoor* block. I am quite biased as I was the lead designer of both sets (few **Magic** designers can claim to have lead the design of an entire block), but I am very proud of how both turned out. *Shadowmoor* is the first large set I've led since *Ravnica*, and I feel that I've kept the bar high.

So what can you all expect from this new block? I can't say too much as it is still months away, but I might be able to sneak in a few small bits of info. For starters, let's see what info we can derive from the announcements above. First off: the names *Shadowmoor* and *Eventide*. "Shadowmoor" clearly implies some amount of darkness while "Eventide" (and yes, eventide is an actual word) is the opposite of Morningtide. Next, compare the expansion symbols of *Morningtide* and *Eventide*.





Hmm, bright sunny Lorwyn is followed by a dark world with names and expansion symbols that imply that the world is the opposite and/or a mirror image. Well, it is. *Shadowmoor* is Lorwyn except it's gone through some pretty radical changes. This event called the Aurora has transformed Lorwyn into its dark opposite. The inhabitants are all there but now warped and twisted. What does this mean mechanically? Well, the creature types that you've been building around all *Lorwyn* block are still going to show up. They'll be different in a number of important ways, but they'll be there. What won't be there though is the tribal theme. The changes to the world of Lorwyn have had huge ripples throughout everything, including the mechanics themselves. **Shadowmoor** is playing with all-new themes, but as I've explained before these themes will have synergy with the *Lorwyn* block.

All new themes? What all new themes? What is *Shadowmoor* block about? If you read the rumor sites, there are a few popular theories. The most commonly believed theory is that *Shadowmoor* is a graveyard-based set. *Future Sight*, after all, sent some strong messages that we would be visiting graveyard mechanics again. And we will, just not yet. Another popular theory is that *Shadowmoor* is an artifact-themed block. Once again, *Future Sight* put out some hints in that direction. Something else we plan to explore in the upcoming years, but not this year. So what block theme are we going to revisit and improve upon? None. The block theme for *Shadowmoor* is one we've never done before. (The set will, by the way, have not one but two timeshifted *Future Sight* cards in it.)

But wait, you say, you've seen some of the material we've put out to entice retailers to purchase *Shadowmoor*. In it, it claims "a popular mechanic returns." And it does. Although I should point out that a mechanic is not necessarily the same thing as a keyword mechanic. Nowhere does it say that a keyword mechanic returns. Of course, nowhere does it say that the returning mechanic isn't a keyword mechanic (I enjoy expanding the potential space to allow more discussion on the rumor boards). Also, when we say "popular," what do we mean? We do a lot of market research. This mechanic is something that has tested highly in our research. (By the way, this is a great reason to answer surveys that pop up on [magicthegathering.com](http://magicthegathering.com)—we really do listen to what they say.)

Enough about what I can't say. What can I say? The returning mechanic is at the heart of *Shadowmoor*, but it's being used in some all new ways. I guarantee when you sit down at the *Shadowmoor* Prerelease that you'll be forced to make decisions that you've never had to make before. Also, the set plays into the duality theme between *Lorwyn* and *Shadowmoor* blocks, both in the art and the mechanics. (Yes, it is both synergistic and opposite at the same time.) Finally, I am going to make the bold statement that in my opinion the *Shadowmoor* / *Shadowmoor* / *Eventide* draft environment is going to be the most dynamic thing you have ever seen.

I'm itching to tell you more because I am so excited about this block, but that will have to wait until another day. Suffice to say that in May, something wicked (and as a former Boston resident, I mean that in both meanings of the word) this way comes. *Shadowmoor* is its own unique stand-alone block yet is also a cool piece to the larger puzzle that is the *Lorwyn* / *Shadowmoor* mega-block. I am as proud of this set as anything I've ever done (and that list includes *Tempest*, *Urza's Destiny*, *Odyssey*, *Mirrodin*, *Fifth Dawn*, *Ravnica*, *Future Sight*, and both *Un-* sets). I can't wait for you all to get your hands on it. And don't worry, there'll be a few more teasers (in this column in particular and on [magicthegathering.com](http://magicthegathering.com) in general) in the months to come.



That's all I got for today. Hopefully I made you think and got you little excited.

Join me next week when I go rogue.

Until then, may you imagine the world that lives on the other side of the mirror.

Mark Rosewater

## Talkback

But wait, we're not done yet. Yes, it's another episode of Talkback where I seek out answers to a specific questions from you, my readers. Today's question stems from a discussion we were having in R&D. We realized that with only one or two exceptions (the biggest one being Seth Rogen's recent Saturday Night Live monologue where he heavily implied that he used to play **Magic**), we have no idea what celebrities play the magical cards.

So my question is: Do you know of any celebrities that currently play or formerly played **Magic**? I'm also interested how you know (and if the information is second-or third-hand). Note that I have no intention of "outing" anyone. I'm not going to post the results to this question. This is just something I've always been curious about.

*Mark Rosewater is Head **Magic** Designer. What this fancy title means is that he's in charge of **Magic** design. This gets him a lot of mail (which he actually reads). When not alternatively destroying and saving **Magic**, he likes to spend time with his family, do stereotypically geeky things (play games, read comics, watch a lot of science fiction, etc.) and write about himself in third person.*



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